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Wendy Warde: Electrical technologist at LANL runs to problems, not away from them

A couple of casual conversations in the women's changing room at Technical Area-55, home to the Plutonium Facility (PF-4), helped prepare the way for **Wendy Warde's** more than 25-year career at the Laboratory. While changing from street clothes to protective clothing, a requirement for performing hands-on work in PF-4, Wendy met Elizabeth Foltyn.

Wendy was an electrical apprentice. Elizabeth was the group leader for what is now the Laboratory's division that supports plutonium heat source and fuel production in support of NASA deep space missions, among other national security programs. Elizabeth quickly noticed Wendy's friendly nature, commitment, teamwork and can-do attitude.

"I would see Elizabeth back in the plant, in the women's changing room," Wendy says. "One day she told me she had heard good things about me, and she wanted to know if I was interested in an electrical technician job at the Laboratory."

While that job didn't pan out, Elizabeth later hired Wendy as a chemistry technician.

"I asked her, 'You want me doing chemistry?'" Wendy recalls, chuckling. "Elizabeth told me, 'We'll teach you.'"

Wendy spent three years in that position, doing particle size analysis to ensure reliable, safe and stable fuel products for NASA and other clients.

"Everything everybody does matters. Helping people and giving your all is going to look different for everybody," she says.

Doing whatever it takes

Today, Wendy's job is to design, build and maintain equipment as an electrical technologist in PF-4.

Her success at the Lab stems from her willingness to do whatever it takes to get the job done, she says, which can look different depending on the day. Once, she was asked to stay late to work on a 70,000-watt capacitor for a machine that needed repairs in PF-4 – the repairs were crucial to meet an important deadline. Wendy didn't think twice about saying yes and ended up working until about 10 p.m.

"My willingness to run toward trouble and help with whatever I can has made working here a joy," she says.

Winding path to Los Alamos

How does someone with an English degree end up designing and maintaining equipment in a nuclear facility?

While Wendy was studying English at Langston University, a historically Black university in Oklahoma, she thought her next step would be law school. She was also interested in helicopters, and after graduation she followed that interest by enrolling in airframe and power plant school. It was there she discovered a passion for electrical work. Wendy signed up for a five-year electrical

apprenticeship in California at the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). A year into it, her husband was offered a job in New Mexico.

Luckily, the apprentice director in Los Angeles called the apprentice director at the IBEW New Mexico chapter and Wendy was allowed to transfer, with the condition that she repeat her first year. During the early days of her apprenticeship in New Mexico, Wendy worked at Intel and Sandia National Laboratories. In November 1994, she joined Los Alamos National Laboratory as a subcontracted employee.

Proud contributor to the Mars mission

Wendy says she is most proud of her work that supported the Perseverance rover, which has enabled surprising discoveries in the search for signs of ancient microbial life on Mars. “It was a privilege and a gift to support Perseverance,” she says.

She designed and built the next generation of furnace controllers in PF-4 that continue helping produce the plutonium (Pu)-238 oxide fuel sources for the rover. Los Alamos is the only national laboratory making these radioisotope power sources, which are used by NASA and the Department of Defense.

Faith Carver, an engineer in Wendy’s division, has worked closely with her on the Pu-238 mission. “Wendy is always willing to work around production schedules to make the mission happen,” Faith says. “She routinely goes above and beyond, and I think a lot of people have just come to expect that from her. I want to make sure Wendy knows she’s an integral part of PF-4.”

When Wendy walks through PF-4, almost everyone knows her, and she has a trove of knowledge that she’s willing to share. “I am very grateful for her passion, attention to detail and service to the Pu-238 missions and PF-4 as a whole,” Faith says.

The next 10 years

In April, Wendy will celebrate her 21st anniversary as a Lab employee (she has a total of 27 years of service with the subcontract work). At age 59, she has no dreams of retiring anytime soon.

“I’m planning to work another 10 years here at the Laboratory if my mind and body can hold out,” Wendy says.

It’s just another sign of her service and commitment.

Wendy Warde, electrical technologist, talks about her more than two decades of service at the Laboratory.

Wendy Warde, electrical technologist at LANL, works on the controls for the latest generation of furnace controllers for plutonium-238 fuel production.

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